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ABSTRACT

Subjects such as death, divorce, and homosexuality appeared in few children's books two decades ago, but today children may be given a steady diet of books on different issues every time in their lives that something happens, such as the first day of school, the birth of a new sibling, or the death of a pet. Heather Quarles' award-winning novel "A Door Near Here" presents reality so sharply focused that it becomes overwhelming to the reader. In addition to the reality of plots, the realistic descriptions in prose add to the sharp focus. Over the past 30 years, adults have been undermining the traditional notion of childhood as a period of protection and apprenticeship. Identification with reality-based stories may give readers their own reality back to them, but they are too close to what is real. In fantasy, readers are empowered and assured that they can succeed and overcome obstacles. Fantasy-based stories give readers hope--hope to keep on living and hope to keep on reading. Teachers need to be giving publishers their feedback that more hope--and more humor is sorely needed in the newest books they are publishing. Contains 19 references and a 6-item list of children's books cited. (RS)

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Too Serious, Too Soon

Where is the Childishness in Children's Fiction?

A decade ago, The New York Times commented on the growing numbers of children's fiction books that dealt with divorce, remarriage, AIDS, drugs, and homosexuality. Real-life issues were not then new to children's literature. Subjects such as death, divorce, and homosexuality had appeared in a few available children's books more than two decades earlier. Today, however, children may be given a steady diet of books on different issues every time in their lives that something happens, such as the first day of school, the birth of a new sibling, or the death of a pet. Name any family problem, social issue, stressful experience or disease and you can find a book about it. Julie Cummins, Coordinator of Children's Services for the New York Public Library says, "Almost anything you see in newspapers shows up in children's books in a very short time" (Lawson, 1990, C1).

For the past two years, I have served as a member of the International Reading Association's Book Award Committee. This Committee selects and awards a writer's first book. This past year the

Chair sent members a list of disqualified books entitled "Children's Books That Didn't Make It". Here is a sampling. (OVERHEAD).

CHILDREN'S BOOKS THAT DIDN'T MAKE IT

1. The Magic World Inside the Abandoned Refrigerator
2. Grandpa Gets a Casket
3. The Pop-Up Book of Human Anatomy
4. You Were an Accident
5. Why Can't Mr. Fork, and Ms. Electrical Outlet Be Friends?
6. That's It. I'm Putting You Up for Adoption
7. Dad's New Wife Robert
8. Strangers Have the Best Candy
9. The Kids' Guide to Hitchhiking
10. Your Nightmares Are Real

The committee members were so overwhelmed by the heaviness of the themes in the 300 submitted books they were reading that not one member realized that the Chair's list was supposed to be a joke.

Clearly the Committee was losing its sense of reality! In fact, I would argue that in the books I have read recently, the reality presented is so sharply focused that it does become overwhelming to the reader. For example, in A Door Near Here, which won the Delacorte Prize for Best First Young Adult Novel, author Heather Quarles gives a nail-biting picture of life when the mother of four children takes to bed and bottle after she loses her job. Their father has divorced their mother, remarried, and moved away so it up to Katherine, the eldest child at 15 years, to try to keep her brothers and sisters in clean clothes, in food, and in school. The four siblings cling to their secrets, terrified that an adult will see beneath the appearances they are trying desperately to uphold and alert Social Services. Katherine struggles valiantly but finally everything slips out of control when her 8-year-old sister runs away to find the door to the Kingdom of Narnia. Readers breathe a sigh of relief when finally the children are found out and helped. As a reader, I could feel my blood pressure lower as the children's reality became manageable.

In addition to the reality of plots, the realistic descriptions in prose add to the sharp focus. In Dove Song by Kristine Franklin, the children's mother has always been delicate and moody. When Bobbie Lynn and Mason's father is shipped off to Vietnam and becomes MIA, their mother

retreats to the bedroom and sinks into a deep depression. The sister and brother not only have to keep themselves clean, find food, and attend school, but they have to clean, feed, and babysit their mother. Ten-year-old Bobbie Lynn describes the extent of her mother's care.

When I peeked in on Mama...the smell almost knocked me flat.

I held my breath and crept into the dark room. I fought the urge to retch. When I got to Mama's bedside I saw what had happened. Mama had thrown up in bed and no one had cleaned it up. I was already mad at Mason for not being home. Now my anger boiled inside me like a teakettle on the stove. Where was he? Mama seemed peaceful enough now. It was probably just a touch of the flu. Had she called for help? Where was Mason, anyway?

I was mad at myself too, not just Mason. How cold I have thought Mama was doing better? and then, to be truthful, there was a tiny bit of mad I felt at Mama too. She was a grownup. How could she expect a couple of kids like me and Mason to take care of her every minute of the day? And why hadn't she gotten up to be sick? So far she'd been able to get up to go to the bathroom. She been able to smoke and rock for hours in her chair. Then I felt furious at myself for even thinking these things, and got busy cleaning things up. I was supposed to feel sorry for Mama, but the fact is, the sorry was mixed with too many other things to be pure sorry.

Cleaning up the mess was a real chore. Mama woke up when I started to pull the blankets off her, but she only stared off into space and didn't say a word. I had to change the sheets like I'd seen a nurse do on General Hospital, with Mama in the bed.

Luckily, Mama had missed her nightgown when she threw up, but then I thought about how she'd had that same nightgown on for days, how she hadn't had a bath or anything, and I realized she wasn't clean at all and she wasn't about to help herself.

'Mama?' I said right next to her head. She opened her eyes and looked at me but she didn't know it was me. I could tell. 'Do you want to put on a new nightgown?' I asked. She closed her eyes. All of a sudden, my legs felt too tired to hold me up. I knelt at the bedside and put my face on the clean sheets I'd just put on the mattress. They felt cool and smelled good, like laundry soap.

'Where have you gone, Mama?' I whispered. Didn't she know she was breaking my heart? (pp. 141-142).

Children's literature deals with single mothers and children in positive themes. Recently, however, through neglect and emotional absence, mothers are presenting problems to their children. Granted there are mothers that cannot help their circumstances. For example, in My Louisiana Sky by Kimberly Willis Holt, the mother is mentally challenged. In Saying It Out Loud the mother is dying of a brain tumor. But then there are other mothers who make conscious choices. In The Year of the Sawdust Man by A. Lafaye the mother leaves her daughter because she can not endure the confinement of marriage. In The Shadow Spinner the mother cripples her daughter's feet before she dies and orphans her daughter. With fathers already physically absent, and mothers now leaving their families emotionally, we must ask, "Who is raising the children?. It appears that the children are trying to raise themselves and sacrificing their childhoods in the process.

The principal architect of our modern notion of childhood was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was he who first criticized education for presenting materials from a uniquely adult perspective that reflected adult values and interests. He demanded a learning process that

took the child's perceptions and stage of development into account. This idea of childhood as a distinct phase preceding adult life became intertwined with modern concepts of universal education and the small nuclear family during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The new society created by the Industrial Revolution required smaller, more mobile families to go to cities where there might be work. While industrialization proceeded quickly, the cultural recognition of childhood as a discrete life phase was given strong social reinforcement with the establishment of child psychology as a scientific discipline (Elkind, 1981, p. 4).

However, as early as 1981, David Elkind notes that the concept of childhood, which had become so vital to the traditional way of life in America, was threatened with extinction. In 1999, Hymowitz in Ready or Not: Why Treating Children as Small Adults Endangers Their Future--and Ours argues that over the last 30 years adults have been undermining the traditional notion of childhood as a period of protection and apprenticeship when adults provide guidance to the young. From the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, Americans embraced what she calls the doctrine of republican childhood which included the encouragement of free play and the rejection of corporal punishment. This ideology has given way to

notions of the child as a naturally moral, rational, independent, self-motivated miniature adult whom adults teach only what the child wants to know. At the same time, adults define themselves as children's allies, partners, and friends, whose duty is to empower children and advocate for them. We have moved from seeing children as miniature adults, to seeing them as children, to seeing them once again as miniature adults.

Elkind argues that parents under stress want to see their children as miniature adults because then the children are is easier to deal with or because the adults do not want to deal with the children at all. He says, "Parents who go to work... are under more stress today than at any time since the Great Depression" (1981, p. 29), and adults under stress are self-centered. They put their own needs ahead of their children's needs, and lack the energy to deal with issues apart from themselves. They have trouble seeing others as individuals and see their own children as stereotypes. To see children as miniature adults may be easier on the parents but this vision is definitely not easier on the children. When the expectations for children are unreasonable at any stage of development, abuse may occur (Elkind, 1981, p. 185).

So does literature help children handle the problems and stress evident in contemporary American society? Well, if literature mirrors life,

then in many of our latest published books, books present to children frightening realities full face. Dan Hade in an NCTE address talks about four paths that explore in literature the richness, mysteriousness and sacredness of all life. He names his second path "the negative path" and states, "This is the path of pain and suffering, of silence and of emptying. This path is about letting go and letting be. It is about daring the dark and going into the shadow side of life" (Hade, 1999, pp. 6-7). However, instead of the grim realities that Katherine and Bobbie Lynn face, he recommends dealing with loss through death in the relationship between Wilbur and Charlotte, dealing with separation from parents with Sylvester, or confronting anger with Gilly Hopkins. Betsy Hearne, Professor Children's Literature at the University of Chicago agrees, "It is not always helpful to hit a child in the face with a problem. Sometimes fantasy is the best way of dealing with reality" (Lawson, 1990, C1).

These days, New York Times tells us that when bookstores are out of the what they call "the titanic of books publishing" or the Harry Potter books, they comfort their readers with Dorothy in The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, The Book of Three, and The Chronicles of Narnia, and Brian Jacques' Redwall fantasy series. Interestingly, since the three published Harry Potter books appeared on the NY Times Bestseller List, more

adults have been buying Harry Potter books as well as the other fantasy series. When publishers interview adults about these books, the adult readers comment that in addition to detail and scenery in the books, there is a lot of spectacular imagination. Does their observation mean that there has been a spark missing in the reading lives of both children AND adults?

Identification with reality-based stories may give readers their own reality back to them, but they are too close to what is real. The characters are too often victims. They must wait for adults to save them. Such contexts unnerve readers of any age with their dreariness and despair. In fantasy, readers are empowered and assured that they can succeed and overcome obstacles. While the obstacles faced may resemble their own, the obstacles appear in contexts different from their own. This identification at a distance makes readers feel safe while dealing with the obstacles. In the Uses of Enchantment, Bettelheim (1977) proposes that children live with greater terrors than most adults can understand and fairy tales give uncanny expression to that terror. A struggle against severe difficulties in life is unavoidable. Such struggle is an intrinsic part of human existence. If one does not shy away but steadfastly meets the unexpected and unjust hardships, at the end one can emerge victorious.

We do not need to shy away from stories that deal with problems but we do need to think about how books present the problems. Fantasy-based stories give readers hope...hope to keep on living and hope to keep on reading. If we want children to be readers for life, then let us remember to provide hope in the books that we provide for children. Clearly teachers need to be giving publishers their feedback that more hope...and more humor is sorely needed in the newest books they are publishing. Your students are an open market.

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